Books

books@theherald.co.uk

Turn to page 11 for the second of our four-page features covering the Wigtown Book Festival from September 22 to October 1. Guests include novelist **Louis de Bernières**, food writer **Claire Macdonald**, broadcasters **Rageh Omaar**, **Magnus Magnusson** and **Allan Little**, and writers **Andrew Greig**, **Jackie Kay** and **Tom Pow**.

A savage indictment

Capitalism gets short shrift in Hugh Savage's vivid memoir of his Glasgow childhood and the conditions that shaped his life in radical politics, says *Ron Ferguson*

At a time when "capitalism has won", it's important to reclaim radical Scottish political voices without sentimentality or romanticism. The victors must not be allowed to write all the history.

There are plenty of memoirs of impoverished Scottish childhoods, but some of them are a bit too cuddly. Hugh Savage's gritty memoir certainly doesn't come into the cute category; yet while some of the realities he talks about are grim, this well-told tale is characterised by broad humanity as well as being a hard-edged political critique.

A plumber, welder and shipyard shop steward, Savage unashamedly sets out his stall on his first page. "I have the greatest hatred for a system that denies there is such a thing as society in the real sense of what that means; a system that denies responsibility for millions of unemployed people, that accepts no liability for a million homeless people, that discards school-leavers, forcing them on to the scrapheap without any means of support, that deprives old age pensioners of more than £80 million by changing the method of assessment so that 11 million pensioners now have the lowest pensions in Europe."

The author vividly describes the tenements in the back loans of Bridgeton and Calton during his childhood in the 1920s and 1930s. In many cases, the middens were pressed right up against the ground floor windows, and the houses were often rat-infested.

Fuelled by anger against a system which allowed these conditions to flourish, the young Savage joined the Communist Party. He was active in both industrial disputes and general political work, being an election agent in the Gorbals and standing as a Communist candidate in municipal elections.

He began to raise issues about the centralism and suppression of free speech in the party, but soon found that these questions were not welcomed. Disillusioned, he resigned from the CP in 1952, followed soon after by his mentor, Harry McShane.

McShane is one of a number of radical activists who appear in the book. Characters like John Maclean, John Wheatley, Davie Kirkwood, Willie Gallacher and Bernadette McAliskey make up the dramatis personae in a political theatre staged on the hustings, on the streets and in prison.

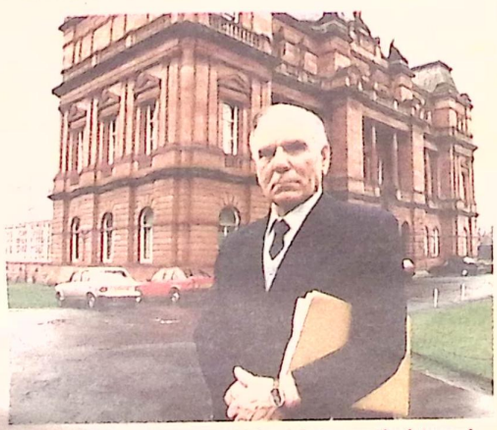
After leaving the Communist Party, Savage continued active participation in radical politics, particularly as a member of Workers' City, which campaigned against the directions taken in Glasgow's year as "City of Culture" and defended Elspeth King and Michael Donnelly during the well-documented struggles over the future of the People's Palace.

This book is about far more than politics, though. Hugh Savage's descriptions of tossing schools, whippet racing, jazz bands in the street, Al Jolson singers and dancing at the Barrowland – as well as of various local characters – make a colourful read.

Typical street shows were watched by hundreds of people, with a grandstand view from the tenement windows, as well as by children and adults sitting on the pavements and the street. When the show was ended and the "bunnet" was passed around, coins would cascade down from the windows.

Savage talks about attending a local gymnasium whose leader, Dr Cossar, spent much of his time trying to persuade boys to emigrate to Canada, New Zealand and Australia, with the promise of work as farm labourers. The poverty in parts of Glasgow was such that, for some lads at least, this was an attractive prospect. Another of the organisers of this mass export of poor children to countries of the British Empire was Dr Barnado.

Bridgeton Cross was a focal point of east end life during Savage's childhood in the 1920s and 1930s.



Hugh Savage was prominent in the debate over the future of the People's Palace on Glasgow Green. Picture: Craig Halkett

The book is edited by James Kelman, whose helpful 60-page introduction sketches in the wider historical context of what was happening at the time. Kelman writes in typically trenchant prose: "Radical history is more complex than others. Not only is the history itself repressed, so too is the radical movement ... Names are marginalised, glossed over, forgotten. So too are the issues, the disagreements and arguments. And conversely, the names of those who did nothing to advance the socialist and labour movement have been venerated."

A memoir of a passionate and decent self-taught man, Born up a Close is a valuable, sharp-edged addition to the literature of a tumultuous era that is swiftly passing into sepia-tinted, romanticised history. ■

Born up a Close: Memoirs of a Brigton Boy, Argyll Publishing, £10.99.

7/SOR/1/5/4

ing through the Highlands, picking up brawny male hitch-hikers for a fate that turned out to be horrifying. Given that an infusion of futuristic, sci-fi language was essential for his purpose, the prose remained sharp, focussed and economical.

We learned throughout this time Faber had been struggling with a project near to his heart, an enormous, quasi-Victorian novel about prostitution and failed relationships, *The Crimson Petal and the White*. It weighed in at well over eight hundred pages, and in it Faber loaded every rift with ore, luxuriating in language and crowding in detail, while for the most part avoiding the most sordid aspects of his theme. The book was enormously successful, and very readable, although a vocal number of readers protested that Faber had failed to provide an ending, or indicate the respective fates of former prostitute Sugar, her ex-lover William, William's daughter Sophie, who was abducted by Sugar – and even William's missing wife, alive or dead. He had left them guessing.

Faced with that clamour, Faber has allowed himself to remain hooked on Sugar and her world, and he quotes his exigent readers at length in his foreword to *The Apple*, a slim new collection of stories all of which concern in some way characters from *Crimson Petal*, from earlier or later times – and none of which answers the urgent queries of his hapless readers. Dickens and other Victorian serial novelists usually stood firm against such supplications, and in the well known case where Dickens qualified his ending to *Great Expectations* to appease his readers, I find it hard to defend the change. But Dickens did always shape his novels to a resolution, as his readers expected, while Faber seemed simply and suddenly to discontinue his pastiche. But *The Apple* indicates that Faber is himself drawn back to the *Crimson Petal* world, and that exuberant prose style.

So 'Christmas in Silver Street' returns to Sugar's early days in the brothel, and her passing care for the pathetic child of the bordello, little Christopher, as she feeds him Christmas dinner with faint echoes of *A Christmas Carol*. 'The Apple' further illustrates the (golden-hearted) young prostitute's attempt to avenge a proselytising hymn-singer's ill treatment of her small child. Clearly, signs of the Miss Sugar who will later 'rescue' Sophie! Some of these stories are more remotely connected to the main characters of the earlier novel, but even those set well in the future fail to offer the resolution so much desired by readers.

I enjoyed *The Crimson Petal and the White*, or almost all of it, on first reading, but I find you can reread it, for the most part, by skimming through the first sentence of every paragraph, and reading a few in detail. I know that Faber is on record as seeing *Crimson Petal* as "an antidote to the tyranny of 'spare prose'", "a big sumptuous meal of prose"; and that of course he is more than entitled to feel. Certainly that novel has enjoyed enormous popular success, comparable to that accorded to Charles Palliser some time ago, and to Sarah Waters today.

But just as certainly, Faber can write in a more modest register when he chooses. He did so in his wonderful novellas, which as he says himself were written "in a very spare style, with no words wasted". He has published two so far, *The Hundred and Ninety-Nine Steps* and *The Courage Consort*. These to my mind represent his finest work so far, beautifully written and shaped, delicately discriminating, and in themselves perfect. Here he presents contemporary characters of real complexity. He resists every temptation to luxuriate, and points every sentence, every nuance with a sure hand. His most recent collection, *The Fahrenheit Twins*, is darker in tone than *Some Rain Must Fall*, yet its stories again show a writer with many directions he may choose to explore. I hope he does.

Born Up A Close - Memoirs of a Brigton Boy
Hugh Savage
ARGYLL PUBLISHING, £9.99
pp288 ISBN 1902831977

REVIEWER: ALAN MCCOMBES

"Without access to their own history and traditions, how can people breathe?" asks James Kelman in a powerful, uncompromising introduction to this posthumous memoir of an old Red Clydeside warhorse. Kelman first met Hugh Savage on a picket line organised by the Workers City group in 1990 during Glasgow 's reign as European City of Culture. Savage, already into his seventies, became the pivotal figure in a daring campaign of creative resistance waged by a raggle-taggle band of urban guerrillas whose weapons were words and whose mission was to expose the crass commercialism at the heart of the culture city extravaganza.

Kelman, Savage and the Workers City group challenged this worship of wealth. They fought to defend the history and culture of Glasgow's working people against its sanitisation and marginalisation by the same elite whose forebears had successfully sanitised and marginalised the Gaelic culture of the Highlands. The name Workers City was a conscious rebellion against the idea of the 'Merchant City', the title which had recently been bestowed on a newly-gentrified quarter of Glasgow in honour of a posse of slave-owning, eighteenth century tobacco barons. Fast forward to 2005 and, as Kelman points out, male life expectancy in Calton, the district which borders the Merchant City , is 54 – lower than the UK average by 22 years.

Kelman reveals that Hugh Savage was a reluctant writer. Whenever he saw a review of the life of yet another an old socialist, he would shake his head with disdain. "He considered such projects an embarrassing aspect of the ageing process." Savage even opens his memoir with an apology: "I am not a great writer, not even a writer at all, but it is time the footsloggers were heard rather than the generals". Notwithstanding his protestations, *Born Up a Close* is a lucid and eloquent piece of writing.

The book is populated with intriguing characters: Maggie McIver, the shrewd, dynamic businesswoman who founded the world famous Barras street market and the Barrowland Ballroom; Dr Cossar, whose gymnasium was one of hundreds set up in inter-war Glasgow by religious zealots to entice young boys from poor homes into slave labour overseas; Bill Struth, the respected Rangers manager whose generosity and humanity took Savage by surprise when he went to work as a young, Celtic-supporting apprentice at Ibrox Stadium.

Working in John Brown's shipyard on the Clyde as WW2 approached, Savage's instinctive hatred of injustice crystallised into political activism. Fascism was on the rampage across Europe, and everywhere the Communists seemed to be leading the fight to defend humanity against barbarism. But Savage joined the Communist Party not because of what was happening in Spain or Germany; he was inspired by the courage, warmth and intellect of the Communist shop stewards he met in John Brown's shipyard.

These were no staring-eyed fanatics spitting out Marxist dogma like white-hot rivets from a rivet gun. The leader of the Young Communist League was "unassuming" with an "easy-going attitude". The convenor of the shop stewards was "very approachable, never aloof and never dictatorial, he was a modest man and very intelligent". Others managed to reconcile their vision of international socialism with membership of the freemasons. One of the lads was a talented footballer who went on to play for Rangers. Then there was the young welder whose ability to sell Communist literature was legendary; he later found fame as Glen Daly, whose rendition of 'The Celtic Song' still reverberates around Parkhead before every home game.

The man who was to exert the greatest influence over Savage's politics was Harry McShane, an ex-boilermaker who became a superb journalist with the *Daily Worker*. Disillusioned with events behind the Iron Curtain even before Hungary, he broke with the Communist Party and went back into the shipyards at the age of 63. As Savage puts it, McShane "turned to Marxist-Humanism long before Dubcek called for Communism with a human face". Savage revered McShane, not just for his political and intellectual skills, but also because he was "completely and utterly incorruptible".

Hugh Savage died in 1996. James Kelman deserves credit for rescuing this important piece of social and political history from obscurity, for writing an extensive introduction, editing and annotating the book, and for drawing together a number of interesting appendices and tributes to the author. *Born Up A Close* is devoid of sentimentality, nostalgia and self-obsession. Beyond his childhood years, there are only a few fleeting references to Savage's personal and family life. The author is not the star of the show. His story is dignified and authentic. Like a photographer, his vision is always focussed outwards at the world around him: the people, the places, the politics.

How to Read the Bible
Richard Holloway
GRANTA, £6.99
pp134 ISBN 1-86207-893-9

REVIEWER: ROSEMARY GORING

For those readers who would normally give this title as wide a berth as if it could give them bird flu, Richard Holloway is quick to make his case. The business of reading and understanding the Bible, he writes, "is too important to leave to believers… Whether or not we believe in God, we can leave him to one side when we read the good book, because the best of it carries its own meaning within itself". In other words, one does not have to consider it as the divinely inspired word of an omnipotent force for it to hold significance. Nor, as he makes clear, do we have to take all of it at face value.

In several moving philosophical works Holloway, the former Bishop of Edinburgh, has charted the evolution of his own faith, from utter conviction to a state some devout Christians would consider near-apostasy. His has been a troubled, hard-fought spiritual journey, and he shows no sign even yet of settling into any sort of metaphysical rut. The scrupulous honesty and clarity of thought he has brought to his own theological outlook are used in this work to superb effect.

One does not envy him the task. The Bible is arguably the most dauntingly complex work of literature known to mankind. Obliged to keep within the format of Granta's How to Read series, whose other subjects include the likes of Marx, Shakespeare, Sartre and Freud, Holloway is forced into a brevity and succinctness most theologians and preachers would find impossible to sustain. This exercise not only demands ruthless focus but also carries the requirement that his guide should be as useful for non-believers as for believers, an almost diabolically difficult remit.

Holloway nevertheless executes his task with unruffled poise. On the most superficial level, *How to Read the Bible* is beautifully and effortlessly written. More importantly, however, it is also an excellent primer. In the space of ten short chapters it strips the flesh from the bones, laying bare the historical, theological and ethical skeleton beneath the texts of the Old Testament – more correctly called the Hebrew Bible – and the New Testament, and in so doing explaining why it continues to exert such fascination and influence.

Starting with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden – "the most fateful fiction in human history" – Holloway moves through the early conceptions of the Jewish God and the exile of his people, to the birth of Jesus and the establishment of a movement in his name after his death. Exploring the historical and mythic origins of different episodes in the Bible, he explains why the Bible was written as it was. Take the story of King David, for instance, who stole Bathsheba from her husband, and had the cuckold sent to the front line, where he was killed. When David faces up to what he has done, he is humbled but not trodden underfoot. The God this account reveals is not one seeking punishment for David's moral weakness, but one who asks that people take a generous, sympathetic perspective of others, rather than a condemnatory line.

Indeed, according to Holloway that desire for empathy with others is the underlying message of the whole Bible. It finds its purest expression in the Gospel of Luke, where the disciple captures Jesus's revolutionary idea, that mercy was fundamental to God's nature. As Holloway writes, "he realizes that we are called not to the impossibility of perfection, but to the possibility of compassion: 'Be compassionate, even as your Father is compassionate.'" There is of course far more to the Bible than this simple line, but were it reduced

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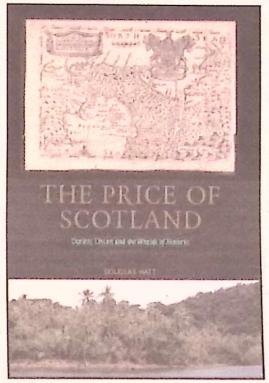

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Douglas Watt
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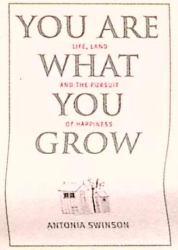

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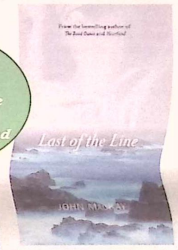

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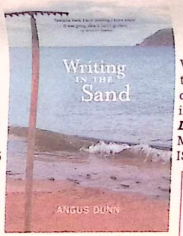

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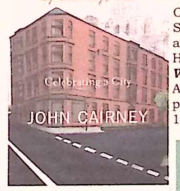

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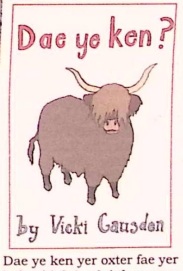

Dae ye ken yer oxter fae yer bahookie? A mini thesaurus translating Scots into English with cartoons.

Dae Ye Ken? by Vicki Gausden, £5.99, paperback, ISBN 1905222599

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BOOKS THAT WILL KNOCK *YOUR* SOCKS OFF

Wondering what to get the bookworm in your life for Christmas? Look no further than these six pages, in which avid readers – and authors – list the books that rocked their world in 2006

SEVEN DAYS BOOKS OF THE YEAR

From page 17

Vicky Featherstone, director, National Theatre of Scotland

I WAS blown away by David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas with its multiple narrators, but in his fourth novel **Black Swan Green** (Sceptre, £16.99) he finds greater focus with an evocative and authentic voice for a young teenage boy at the time of the Falklands war. It's an achingly sad novel and will connect deeply with anyone who's ever had to grow up, but especially those who come of age in the early 1980s. And it has one of the most beautiful descriptions of the act of writing that I've ever read.

Kirsty Wark, broadcaster

ANDREW O'Hagan's **Be Near Me** (Faber, £16.99) was one of the most intelligent, tender and challenging books I have read. Set in a small Ayrshire town (of a kind I know well), it's both the story of the reaction of the town to the arrival of a cultured English Roman Catholic priest and his own emotional journey. O'Hagan is an occasional guest on Newsnight Review and Julie Myerson is on more regularly, but I would have picked his and her book regardless. Myerson's latest novel **The Story Of You** (Jonathan Cape, £14.99) explores the impact of grief as the narrator Rosy conjures up a long-past encounter and brings it into her real workaday world.

Cormac McCarthy's **The Road** (Picador, £16.99) should be on everybody's Christmas shopping list. The American landscape is desolate after some kind of disaster; the dead lie where they perished. A man and his son try to make it to the coast, hiding from marauding road gangs, foraging in abandoned houses for food and water. It is a warning, but it is the intimacy between father and son that marks this book out.

Dr Richard Holloway, director of Creative Scotland

THE blockbuster of the year has to be William Dalrymple's **The Last Mughal** (Bloomsbury, £25), a study of the 1857 Delhi uprising against the Raj. Not least of its many virtues is the way it demonstrates the dynamic interconnection between historical events that go on reverberating down the centuries. Today's Taliban are the great great grandchildren of the rebels of 1857. An intellectual blockbuster of 2006 was undoubtedly Daniel C Dennett's **Breaking The Spell** (Allen Lane, £25), an exhilarating attempt to explain religion as a natural phenomenon. It's a bracing read for anyone interested in religion, though his definition of the subject is a bit too narrow for this reader. Brenda Maddox's latest biography, **Freud's Wizard** (John Murray, £25), is another stimulating read. It's an honest but affectionate life of Ernest Jones, the Welsh doctor who rescued Freud from the Nazis and brought him to London.

George Galloway, MP

I HAVEN'T read a better analysis of where we are going politically – and where we have come from – than Simon Jenkins's **Thatcher And Sons** (Allen Lane, £20). The premise, with which I concur absolutely, is that Thatcher's successors, her sons, are carrying on the family policies. Ominously, the most devoted son is Chancellor Gordon Brown. His profligacy as chancellor is minutely detailed. Absolutely necessary reading. I also enjoyed, if that's the right description, **Fiasco** (Allen Lane, £25), by Thomas Ricks, The Washington Post's Pentagon correspondent, a devastating and brutal dissection of the Iraq catastrophe. It's just a pity his paper didn't tell us all this before the war started. And a perfect stocking filler is my own **Fidel Castro Handbook** (MQ Publications, £14.99).

Alain de Botton, author

I LEARNED a lot from Lewis Hyde's **The Gift** (Canongate, £15), a study of how artists are evaluated in societies like our own where a high income is taken as the principal measure of success. The veteran New Yorker writer John McPhee published **Uncommon Carriers** (Farrar Straus Giroux, £12.99), a set of interconnected essays about the ways in which cargo is transported around the world. There's a particularly memorable description of how lobsters are carried by UPS. MA Screech, the great translator of Montaigne's Essays into English, has published a fresh translation of *Rabelais's* **Gargantua And Pantagruel** *(Penguin Classics,* £16.99), which blows off the cobwebs, explains the jokes and lets us appreciate the genius.

Peter Howson, artist

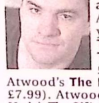
HAVING read Richard Dawkins's **The God Delusion** (Bantam, £20), I felt stronger in my faith than ever before. Dawkins does more for religion than any great evangelist could: he's gone so anti-religion it's funny now. I really enjoyed **The Gift** (Canongate, £15) by Lewis Hyde. The basis of the book is that a work of art is a gift, which is a great thing to read but causes problems as my collectors want my work for nothing now. He traces the history of art from biblical times, showing how it became a commodity that changes hands for huge amounts of money. I don't agree with everything Richard Holloway says in **How To Read The Bible** (Granta, £6.99), but I can't avoid someone whose writing is so honest.

Laura Hird, author

OVER the past few years I've been lucky enough to feature several stories by BBC Short Story competition winner A Igoni Barrett on my website, several of which are included in his brilliant debut short story collection, **From Caves Of Rotten Teeth** (Daylight, £7.99). Another great short story collection I'd recommend is **Unbuttoning The Violin** (Banipal, £3.95), which anthologises the work of four excellent Arab writers – Joumana Haddad, Mansoura Ez-Eldin, Ala Hlehel and Abed Ismael – in translation. The book's publication tied in with a well-received tour of these writers in the UK earlier this year. Taras Grescoe's **The Devil's Picnic** (Macmillan, £12.99) in which he roams the world, trying food, drugs and drink that are illegal and considered dangerous by various authoritarian governing bodies, is also a great read.

Dan Rhodes, author

IN a literary climate where young writers are so often praised for their (yawn) maturity, it was a real pleasure to read the resolutely un-grown-up **Hound Dog** (Jonathan Cape, £14.99) by Richard Blandford. Squalid, raucous and wildly entertaining, this tale of a renegade Elvis impersonator would make an ideal stocking-filler for the surly teen in your life. Amélie Nothomb is a bit more sensible, but in her case that's not such a bad thing. **The Life Of Hunger** (Faber, £9.99) must be about her 100th quasi-autobiographical slim volume, but it's always fun to take a journey inside her extraordinary Belgian brain. This is deluxe navel-gazing. And it's heartwarming to see **The Slaves Of Solitude** (Constable & Robinson, £7.99) by the mighty Patrick Hamilton back in print, where it belongs.



Mark Cousins, film critic and broadcaster

AT the beginning of the year I adored Joan Didion's **The Year Of Magical Thinking** (HarperPerennial, £7.99) and Margaret Atwood's **The Penelopiad** (Canongate, £7.99). Atwood's encomium on Lewis Hyde's **The Gift** (Canongate, £15) made me read it, after a summer of bad news and bleak times. Hyde's book lifted my spirits and turned me back into myself. The best paragraphs I read this year were in Alan Warner's **The Worms Can Carry Me To Heaven** (Jonathan Cape, £11.99). **China On Screen: Cinema And Nation** (Columbia University Press, £17), by Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, made me look at Chinese movies in new ways.

James Meek, author

WHILE I read it, John Burnside's **A Lie About My Father** (Jonathan Cape, £12.99) transplanted itself into that curious region of memory usually reserved for recollection of my own dreams and nightmares. As unlikely as truth and as true as the well-imagined, with a poet's concern for language and a novelistic scope of time, space and narrative, it becomes immediately a part of the literary landscape; one of those high lochs only visible after a long foot journey, from which you come back changed. There are novels, and there are metanovels – the sum of a novelist's life work. I'm not sure which is the greater delight from Alan Warner's excellent **The Worms Can Carry Me To Heaven** (Jonathan Cape, £11.99): the book itself, an evocation of modern middle-class southern Europe as plausible as it is lyrical; or the sense that the arch is still rising and the keystone of Warner's life work is yet to come.

Lady Antonia Fraser, historian

ANY year when there is a new Ian Rankin, his work must be a strong contender for my most enjoyable book of the year. **The Naming Of The Dead** (Orion, £17.99) is one of his very best: who but Rankin would make a riveting mystery out of the G8 summit? There remains the hideous question of Rebus's looming retirement. I can only quote Glück's Orfeo in his famous lament on the subject of loss: Che faro senza Euridice? (What shall I do without him?) Ruth Scurr's **Fatal Purity: Robespierre And The French Revolution** (Chatto & Windus, £20) is an extremely intelligent, well-researched book with elements of the detective story. What happened to turn the earnest, liberal revolutionary who believed in universal suffrage into the leader of the Terror? Another notable historical biography, **Catherine The Great: Love, Sex And Power** by Virginia Rounding (Hutchinson, £20), tells the gripping story of the longest-ruling Russian monarch. Both of the latter, incidentally, are first books: very encouraging for the future of historical biography, a subject, of course, about which I am particularly passionate.

Norman Blake, guitarist and singer with Teenage Fanclub

I READ the recent reissue of John Updike's **Rabbit, Run** *(Penguin, £8.99) and thought it beautifully written.* I'm going to have to read it again as well as the other Rabbit novels. I also enjoyed Anthony Beevor's **The Battle For Spain: The Spanish Civil War** (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £25). We play a fair number of gigs in Spain and because I've spent so much time there, I wanted to have an understanding of Spanish history and politics. The republican side, with its various factions, reminded me of the People's Front of Judea in Life Of Brian. I generally don't like to read music books because they're terrible but I'm interested in **Nirvana: The True Story** (Omnibus, £19.95) because the author, Everett True, knew Kurt Cobain before he was famous. So many music books are written by people who never had personal knowledge of the people in question but Everett spent a lot of time in Seattle.

John Mackay, broadcaster

WHEN the local council refused to lay a two-mile road to Calum MacLeod's house in Raasay, he built it himself. **Calum's Road** (Birlinn, £9.99) by Roger Hutchinson is the inspiring tale of how an unforgiving landscape was conquered by one man's determination.

Scotland slumped exhausted in the aftermath of the first world war. Trevor Royle's **The Flowers Of The Forest: Scotland And The Great War** (Birlinn, £25) is a different angle on an oft-repeated, but ever sorrowful story. Graham McColl's **'78: How A Nation Lost The World Cup** (Headline, £17.99) is a rare joy – a football book worth reading. People forget just what a buzz there was over Scotland's sojourn to Argentina. A great party, albeit one that left an almighty hangover.

Neal Ascherson, writer

DAVID Blackbourn's **The Conquest Of Nature** (Jonathan Cape, £30) is an utterly original retelling of German modern history through the fate of its rivers and wetlands, which expertly links gung-ho fantasies of "development" to the story of German racial imperialism. Billy Kay's **The Scottish World** (Mainstream, £16.99), is a ramble across the planet, and is full of revelations about the Scottish diaspora overlooked by most historians. Lastly, in Imre Kertesz's great novel **Fateless** (Vintage, £7.99), his own experience of the Nazi camps is told through the eyes of a boy learning how to survive and think for himself, which is totally unlike all the other survivor accounts I know and all the more shocking for its weirdly impassive and even egotistical treatment of horrors.

Gavin Wallace, head of literature, Scottish Arts Council

I'M somewhat surprised that more has not been made of William McIlvanney's marvellous **Weekend** (Sceptre, £16.99). Reading this deft, rich and deep novel was like renewing an old friendship with arguably the greatest prose stylist of 20th century Scottish letters. Steven Poole's **Unspeak** (Little, Brown, £9.99), a shatteringly intelligent exposure of just how far public language is being manipulated to prevent us thinking ("ethnic cleansing", "war on terror", "regime change", et al), was a chilling intellectual wake-up call. Finally, although slightly biased as the host for Margaret Atwood's memorable visit to Scotland this October, I'm sure I would have chosen her short story sequence **Moral Disorder** (Bloomsbury, £15.99) anyway; that blend of mordant irony and laconic pathos truly deserves the epithet "Atwoodian".

Christopher Rush, author

SUNDAY Herald Literary Editor Alan Taylor said recently that of 10,000 novels published annually, perhaps 10 were worth reading. Actually I struggled to find one, especially among the Booker shortlist. Poetry didn't blow me away either. No, I'm going for biography. And my easy favourites in this field are: first and foremost Maggie Fergusson's immensely sympathetic and insightful portrait of **George Mackay Brown** (John Murray, £25); Claire Tomalin's study of Thomas Hardy, **The Time-Torn Man** (Viking, £25); and Byron Rogers's scrutiny of the Welsh poet and cleric RS Thomas, **The Man Who Went Into The West** (Aurum Press, £16.99). All three probe the souls of their subjects with sharp compassion and are the jewels in the crown of biography, which for me has been the crowning genre this year.

Ronald Frame, author

WITH her commanding intelligence, her nifty cultural cross-references, her sheer unflagging enthusiasm, and her natural flair and flow of expression, Catharine Arnold succeeds in **Necropolis: London And Its Dead** (Simon & Schuster, £14.99) in, so to speak, breathing life into her sometimes grisly subject. **Purity Of Blood** by Arturo Perez-Reverte (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £9.99) provides very superior escapism as Captain Alatriste – "a man of honour who lives by his sword" – swashbuckles through Inquisition-paranoid Madrid. I'm reaching back a year, to a purchase I made from a table of festive books in a shop: the glorious **Christmas At The New Yorker** (Modern Library £9.99). So much excellent writing, so many witty drawings, you have to ration your intake. Timeless. What better reward to yourself for having survived Yuletide?

William Dalrymple, author

THIS was the year that the catastrophe of Anglo-American foreign policy finally came home to roost, as it became clear to everyone – even the Americans – that during the past five years the wrong countries had been invaded for the wrong reasons, secular Ba'athists had been confused with fundamentalist Islamists, a clueless intelligence community had been producing serially worthless information – all led on by a president who long after invading Iraq (according to Peter Galbraith's recent memoir) was still unaware of the existence of any distinction between Sunnis and Shias. Amid this mess there have been two excellent books on the Middle East that define and illuminate the real roots of the conflict: Emma Williams's brilliant and moving **It Is Easier To Reach Heaven Than The End Of The Street: A Jerusalem Memoir** (Bloomsbury, £14.99), one of the best of recent books about Israel and Palestine; and Lawrence Wright's **The Looming Tower** (Allen Lane, £20), possibly the best account yet written on the rise of al-Qaeda. The most visually spectacular book of the year was **Lucknow: City Of Illusion** (Prestel Verlag, £50), edited by Rosie Llewllyn-Jones, a lavishly produced and beautifully printed photographic study on the architecture of India. The book uses the work of early photographers such as Felice Beato to record the fabulously baroque architecture of Lucknow, most of which was wantonly destroyed by the vengeful Victorians in the aftermath of another catastrophic clash between East and West, the Indian mutiny of 1857.

Tom Leonard, poet

THE Israeli historian *Ilan Pappe's astonishing* **The Ethnic Cleansing Of Palestine** *(Oneworld Publications, £16.99) illuminates what must now be the incontrovertible facts of 1948.* As Samuel Beckett writes near the end of his novel, Watt: "Change all the names." Guyanan poet Martin Carter's collected poems and selected prose, **University Of Hunger** (Bloodaxe, £12), cover his journey from colonial prison cell to government minister. The late Hugh Savage's **Born Up A Close** (Argyll Publishing £10.99) is an enjoyable account of growing up and working in Glasgow, delineating a radical political tradition that bodies such as the headache-inducing melange of the new Kelvingrove Art Gallery would rather we all now ignored.

Jamie Byng, Canongate publisher

MY delight at Canongate having both Maria Hyland and Kate Grenville on the Man Booker shortlist was tempered by the sadness I felt at Andrew O'Hagan's **Be Near Me** (Faber, £16.99) missing out. It was my novel of the year; an engrossing and profound work of enormous power and great delicacy that brought to mind some of the fiction of the late, great Muriel Spark. Michael Cox's **The Meaning Of Night** (John Murray, £17.99) is, by comparison, a pure entertainment, but what an entertainment. Think Shadow Of The Wind with its exuberant storytelling, intricate plot-weaving and fantastic characters. And then there is **The Gift** (Canongate, £15), Lewis Hyde's far-reaching study of the place of gifts within society. This exceptional book is essential reading for anyone who cares about the arts. It's a genuine life-changer, a masterpiece that everyone you give it to will be eternally grateful for.

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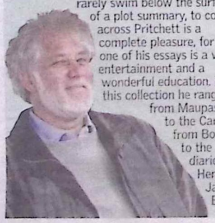
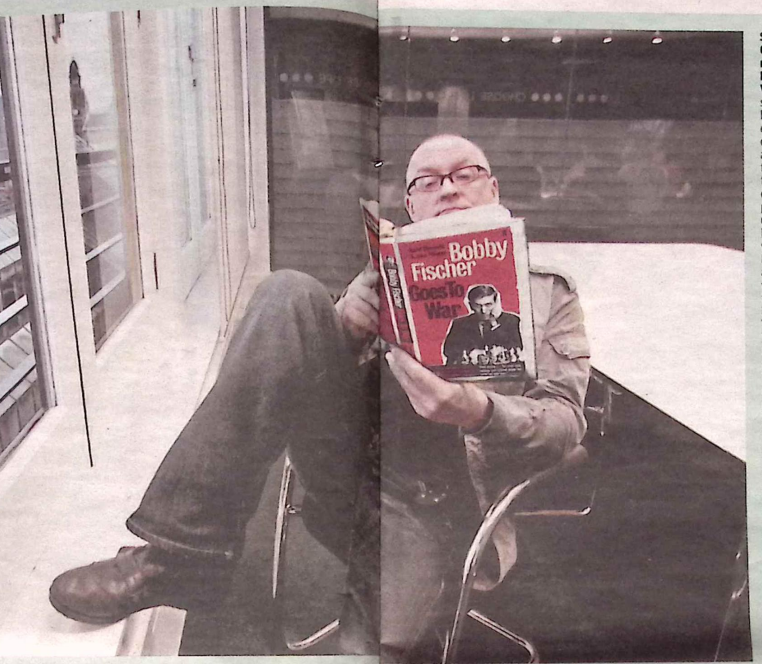


Michael Ondaatje, author

LAST April, in a second-hand book shop, I picked up **Books In General** (Chatto & Windus, £11) by VS Pritchett. Subtitled 34 Studies Of Books And Novelists, it was totally unknown to me – perhaps it was a selection published only in North America. It was in many ways the most exciting book I read this year. Today when most critics rarely swim below the surface of a plot summary, to come across Pritchett is a complete pleasure, for every one of his essays is a wise entertainment and a wonderful education. In this collection he ranges from Maupassant to the Carlyles, from Boswell to the diaries of Henry James. Each piece is a beautifully written meditation, full of wit.

"And the marriage of the Carlyles? Because sex is the predilection of the 20th century, we have to turn to the late 18th century for the analysis of love, and to the Victorian age for the specialists in marriage. We go, that is to say, to the professionals. For that is what the Tolstoys and the Carlyles are. No doubt enters their minds as to married monogamy being the only way and the most engrossing; their groans from the treadmill are part of their pleasure; they have the satisfaction of those who have chosen a Fate." And this on TE Lawrence: "What a guilt-eaten book Seven Pillars is and how subtle ... It is the solitary classic of the self-conscious warrior."

A few months later, while in England, I went to several bookstores looking for any collection of Pritchett's essays and it seemed that none existed. This is heartbreaking. His non-fiction and criticism is the work of a master. Hopefully there is some collection of his essays in the works.



Stuart Cosgrove, Channel 4 director, nations and regions

BOBBY Fischer Goes To War (Faber, £8.99) is the story of how the Soviets lost the most extraordinary chess match of all time. David Edmonds and John Eidnow's fascinating book charts the paranoia, political chicanery and psychological trauma that underpinned Bobby Fischer's historic battle with Russian grandmaster Boris Spassky. Biography and history collide in what becomes a cold war thriller. **Guernica: The Biography Of A Twentieth Century Icon** by Gijs Van Hensbergen (Bloomsbury, £8.99) is a towering biography of one of modernism's great paintings. It pursues Picasso's masterpiece as it controversially straddles the war between fascism and the republic, to assume its place beyond history. John Burdett's **Bangkok 8** (Corgi, £7.99) is daft but readable pulp fiction about a Bangkok cop who is the son of a Thai prostitute and a committed Buddhist. He cleans up the streets with a combination of hard fists and karma. Total rubbish but worryingly good fun.

Photograph: Stewart Attwood

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built and Dundee in particular would have suffered accordingly.

Fittingly, *Battle for the North* opens with a gripping description of the night the first Tay bridge collapsed on 28 December 1879, a scene memorialised by William McGonagall. Having hymned the bridge when it was opened in May 1878, he attempted to withdraw from circulation all copies of *Address to the Tay Bridge* – even to the extent of buying them back himself. In its place he offered a panegyric:

But when the train came near to Wormit Bay
Boreas he did loud and angry bray,
And shook the central girders of the bridge of Tay.

Whatever McGonagall's deficiencies in the scanning department, he undoubtedly caught the mood of the moment. Man, it was believed, could not alone be at fault. The bridge's collapse had occurred on a night of unprecedented winds. It must an act of God. Not surprisingly, McKean is not inclined to countenance that theory, offering his own ideas about what brought about the disaster which momentarily stopped Victorian Britain literally in its tracks.

It is, however, testimony to the Victorians' refusal to be beaten that lessons were learned and in time a new bridge was built. Apart from Beeching's cuts in the 1960s, the railway map of the nation has changed little since the nineteenth-century. The final piece of the jigsaw was the opening of the Forth Bridge in 1890, making a remarkable double for William Arrol, the engineer who had also built the second Tay bridge. Both bridges are symbols of an age in which ambition knew no bounds and human beings thought they could overcome any obstacle. If only Scotrail were as half as gung-ho.

There are Words: Collected Poems
by Gael Turnbull,
SHEARSMAN BOOKS, £18.95
pp496 ISBN 0907562892

REVIEWER: DOROTHY MCMILLAN

Gael Turnbull, who died in 2004 aged 76, was born in Scotland and retired there. In between he was educated in Winnipeg, Cambridge and Pennsylvania and worked as a GP and anaesthetist in England, Canada and America. An intellectual, he had a passionate concern for the life of the mind and an equally passionate regard for the lives of ordinary people and of the dispossessed. His poetic practice is similarly all-embracing, of American and European Modernism as well as more traditional forms and styles. Migrant Press, which he founded in 1957, did much to bring together the poetry of both sides of the Atlantic.

It is perhaps a cliché to remark that Turnbull, like William Carlos Williams, whom he admired, was a doctor-poet, but the conjunction of the two professions does matter. All poets no doubt engage with the pressure of the body on the spirit but the doctor has more ways of thinking about it than other writers, has actually encountered more painful and joyful conjunctions than most people. The merging of his two vocations is noticeable in a group of poems from his thirties, 'To You I Write'. In these poems which analyse relationships, the poet is both recalcitrant patient, relentlessly picking at the scab of his feelings, and concerned doctor, meticulously investigating the causes of emotional disorder. Here repetition and recycling of key phrases often stands in for metaphor and this obsessiveness is a peculiarly harrowing way of representing hurt as in 'Perhaps if I Begin'.

"Where did it all go wrong? Did it go wrong at all?

Such 'going' is wrong, perhaps. But where did that wrong begin?

Was there a place and a time, too far back to be traced, for the mistake

That cannot be found, if it was a mistake?"

Turnbull's compassion for others has a kind of cool intensity; it finds wit and paradox to foreground pain and absence. In 'At Mareta' he shows that thinking is a luxury for the poor and hungry; the rich on the other hand can think, but this doesn't make them lovely or life-giving; the sun "goes on shining as usual", equally indifferent to the lucky rich and the suffering poor.

Being a doctor, then, assists human perception but it also intensifies the poet's struggle with words: like war, the suffering that a doctor sees challenges the possibilities of words and hence provokes new formal solutions. As late as 1995 Turnbull finds a brutal compassionate comedy in his examination of a very old woman's "nether parts" in 'Comic Relief'.

"all the crannies
and apertures, portals
of privacy, shame,
even love

where my fingers
must juggle
and pry, in contortion
to aid, as we play

our parts,
my Harlequin
to her Columbine...."

And being a doctor also furnishes the poet with the possibility of travel, allowing him to become a chronicler of the new world and the old. The Canadian experience perhaps evoked the bleak world of the Sagas, and certainly offered the basic life of the lumber-camp where he worked; America gave him blues and country music and Death Valley and a Californian ghost town. Back in England, in Worcester, he wrote the Yeatsian *Residues* which chronicles memories of his own life and loves, interspersed with the residues of things terrible and glorious from the wider past and present. And so Lord Gilgamesh rubs shoulders with Arletty; old Mr King with his "buttock ulcers" shares a stubborn stoicism with the Covenanter martyrs; the sadness of lost love – "and yet I have lost touch with you –/as if we had mislaid our hands" – shares space with Mayakovsky and Kruschev and John Bunyan. And all this is subsumed within a perception of the beauty and ephemerality of what we snatch from time's passage as seen in 'Residues'.

"a precipitate of shimmers, mica seeds,
of milky crystals, hoarfrost grains,
a dust of spilicules, flaring glints,
a spume of shivered silver,
diamantine
flecks, an archipelago of quivered light
from an edge of iron
against a grindstone, thrust –
for a moment held
against the wheel of time"

This linguistic love affair underpins all of Turnbull's poetry, whether lyric, or narrative or epigram or his idiosyncratic prose poems; even his late kinetic poems, which can only be signalled in this volume, were exploratory ways of re-engaging language with the environment. These *Collected Poems* enable readers to savour the extraordinary variousness of Turnbull's verse.

Born up a Close

memoirs of a Brigton boy

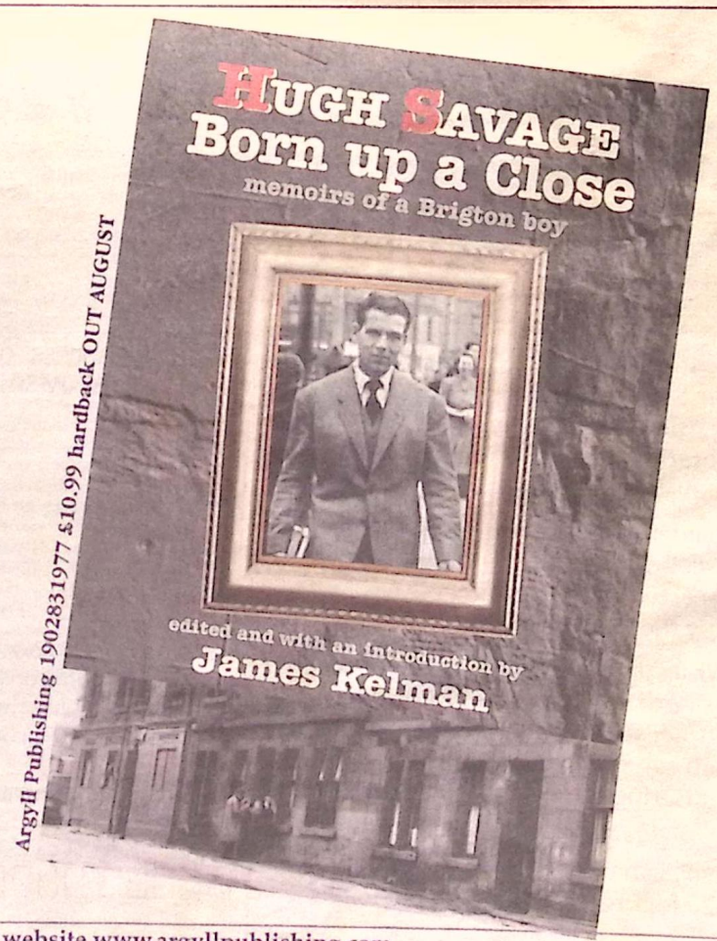
Hugh Savage (1918–1996)

edited and with an introduction by James Kelman

A memoir of growing up in twentieth century industrial Scotland, Hugh Savage recounts his early years in Glasgow's Brigton and paints a touching yet realistic picture of tenement life and the physical hardships of the world of work. His later politicisation during World War II while in the employ of John Brown's shipyard is revealing. The politics of social inequality were every day evident.

'Hugh Savage's account helps to reclaim aspects of Clydeside's radical history.'
James Kelman

'Popular memory is essential to a sense of history, justice and independent thought.'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